

The College Board, makers of the SAT, added a writing component in 2005. Its Web site claims that this change was made in part to meet the changing needs of students, teachers, and college admissions staff. The College Board asserts that the addition of writing to the test will strengthen its predictive validity and help colleges to make better admissions decisions. It is also noted that the addition of writing should “reinforce the importance of writing skills throughout a student’s education and support the improvement of the academic preparation of all students, bolstering their chances for academic success in college” (http://www.collegeboard.com/highered/ra/sat/sat_faqs.html#quest3). Many educators are concerned that the twenty-five-minute period for students to complete the essay is insufficient; the NCTE is chief among the organizations protesting (see http://www.ncte.org/library/files/About_NCTE/Press_Center/SAT/SAT-ACT-rt-report.pdf). However, the addition of the writing component to the SAT at least brings writing to the attention of secondary teachers like no other measure could.

Just What Should You Grade?

If your students have produced good writing, then you must provide feedback on it. Many times, that feedback includes a grade of some sort. First, realize that *not all writing assignments need to be graded*. This is especially important for content-area teachers, because thinking about grading every piece of writing often hinders teachers from assigning enough writing tasks. Second, embrace the notion that you can give considerable feedback to students about writing *without* giving them a grade. These two core ideas are essential to creating a healthy writing environment in any academic class.

Feedback about the content of the writing can be given to students throughout the writing process. The personalized attention that a teacher provides when working with a student one-on-one or in a small group is often what students remember far longer than they remember a grade scrawled on a sheet of paper or all of those red circles. Also, writing brief comments on students’ papers during the drafting and revising phases is appreciated by students and can be very useful, especially if the comments focus on what the writer is doing well and on genuine questions that you have as a reader.

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Evaluation, which ideally employs a rubric clearly delineating several performance levels, is necessary when students complete the writing process and give you a publication-quality draft (meaning that it is suitable for, at a minimum, the teacher and the classmates). Other writing assignments that are more formative in nature must be evaluated using a different rubric.

How Should You Grade Writing?

Let’s return to the core idea of not grading everything. Don’t “grade” writing-to-learn assignments. Consider giving some kind of effort or completion score if your school’s grading system allows for it (or if you feel that students won’t complete the work otherwise), but remember that writing-to-learn activities are not about creating polished products. They are for the writer’s benefit; they are meant to encourage deeper understanding within the mind of the learner. They are also useful for the teacher. By reading and providing even informal feedback on these assignments, you can “ratchet up” the quality of instruction because you have a better understanding of student learning. Writing does “double duty”: It has a cognitive effect that enhances student learning, and it helps the teacher to tailor instruction immediately to student needs.

Mondschein-Leist (1997) suggests that writing-to-learn assignments can be used to stimulate discussion, monitor overall understanding of a class, provide review for the students, or reinforce the learning of information that students have not mastered.

Therefore, when you create a writing assignment, you must first consider your *purpose*. Do you want to see how students are learning—where they stand or how they’re doing in the current unit? If so, you are going to assign a *writing-to-learn* activity, like a learning log entry, an exit slip, or an impromptu composition, probably written in only one sitting and in only one draft. The purpose is for the student to grapple with course content, and any feedback or grading must be focused on that primary purpose. A system of checks, pluses, and minuses always worked well for me, and many teachers find it easy to implement. (See Exhibit 3.3, which provides three examples using this format.)

Some teachers have wonderful ways to discuss levels of performance with students. For example, one teacher tells her students that the plus level of the rubric “has the wow factor.” The check level “gets the job done,” and the minus level “doesn’t do the trick.” She spends time when first using the rubric to show exam-

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EXHIBIT B.3
Examples of Rubrics for Writing-to-learn

Rubric A

This writing-to-learn rubric provides a quick score to each student and is only for completion of the task.

	✓	—	No score or redo
The response demonstrates all of the qualities for ✓ and also includes unique insight or an extraordinary example.	The response is on topic and is of an appropriate length to demonstrate understanding of the targeted content, concept(s), or skill(s).	The response is partially off topic or is insufficient in length to demonstrate understanding of the targeted content, concept(s), or skill(s).	The response is illegible, entirely off-topic, or the student did not do a response.

Rubric B

This writing-to-learn rubric provides a score to all students and gives recognition with specific feedback to students who write an advanced response.

	✓	—	No score or redo
The response demonstrates all of the qualities for ✓ and also includes this unique insight or extraordinary example.	The response is on topic and is of an appropriate length to demonstrate understanding of the targeted content, concept(s), or skill(s).	The response is partially off topic or is insufficient in length to demonstrate understanding of the targeted content, concept(s), or skill(s).	The response is illegible or entirely off-topic, or the student did not do a response.

plus from each level. Another teacher told me that she tells her students that if they score proficient (check), they “leapt over the tall building.” The exemplary (plus) level means that the student “cleared the building with room to spare.” However, the minus level means that the student “smashed into the building but at least

EXHIBIT B.3
Examples of Rubrics for Writing-to-learn (continued)

Rubric C

This writing-to-learn rubric provides specific feedback to students who write an advanced response and to those nearing proficiency.

	✓	—	No score or redo
The response demonstrates all of the qualities for ✓ and also includes this unique insight or extraordinary example.	The response is on topic and is of an appropriate length to demonstrate understanding of the targeted content, concept(s), or skill(s).	The response is partially off topic or is insufficient in length to demonstrate understanding of the targeted content, concept(s), or skill(s). Next time try this:	The response is illegible or entirely off-topic, or the student did not do a response.

tried.” If the student doesn’t get a score, it means “his or her feet stayed on the ground.” The last comparison I’ll share is based on Oreo cookies: A check is just an Oreo. The plus level is a double-stuffed, chocolate-coated Oreo, and the minus level is the Oreo with the filling removed. No score is called “smashed-up Oreo cookie crumbs with no filling.” Find a metaphor that works for you and your rubric, or use one of these to get started.

Sometimes a simple rubric of check, plus, and minus won’t work. If your purpose is to have students demonstrate understanding of or proficiency in required content, you *must* provide feedback and score differently. It’s best to have a rubric delineating four levels of proficiency demonstrated in the final written product: exemplary/advanced, proficient, nearly proficient or progressing, and not yet near proficient. Each level needs specific criteria to make clear to students exactly what is expected. Some teachers find that having only three levels works well first: the exemplary, proficient, and nearly proficient levels. As you become more “tuned in” to specific problems faced by the struggling students, the bottom level may begin to “split” and you may revise the rubric to show what the difference really is